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2
'New' Themes

The media have always been at the centre of feminist critique. In the book that stimulated the revival of the American women's movement in the mid-1960s, the media and in particular women's magazines were scorned for their contribution to 'The Feminine Mystique' – as the book was called – the myth that women could find true fulfilment in being a housewife and a mother. Author Betty Friedan – a former women's magazine editor herself – accused the media and a range of allied experts such as doctors, psychiatrists and sociologists, of installing insecurity, fear and frustration in ordinary women who could not and would not live up to the ideal of the 'happy housewife heroine' (Friedan, 1963). In another feminist classic, *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer (1971) raged against mass produced romantic fiction for conning women into believing in fairy tales of heterosexual romance and happiness.

Obviously, the media had to become important targets of the American women's movement. American communication legislation offered ample opportunity to challenge broadcasters' policies towards the portrayal and employment of women. In the 1970s and 1980s many local television stations saw their legal licence to broadcast challenged by women's groups because of their sexist representation of women and their neglect of women's issues. Media, and television in particular, were supposed to provide women with more positive and liberating role models instead. Although none of these legal complaints ('petitions to deny') was successful, they did raise the awareness of broadcasters to the depiction of women, and they triggered academic research to document and support the claims of the women's movement (Cantor, 1988).

In other countries the portrayal of women in the media has aroused similar impassioned feminist critique. For instance, in the mid-1980s, Clare Short, a British Labour Party Member of Parliament, became so infuriated by the display of topless pin-up girls in the tabloid press that she introduced a bill to ban these 'Page Three Girls'. Her campaign received enormous support from ordinary women throughout Britain who finally felt encouraged to express their frustration about what they saw as a daily insult that had to be endured in public places like subways and workplaces, as well as in the home from husbands or sons. Newspapers and MPs of both parties were extremely critical of Short's campaign and accused her of trying to introduce censorship. Other arguments brought against Short claimed that she represented a prudish morality, an anachronism in a modern, sexually liberated society. Parts of the gay movement and the women's movement feared that, once accepted, Short's bill would legitimize government measures against gay literature and other representations of gay sexuality. There were also feminists who suggested calling for equal treatment by publishing pictures of male pin-ups. Although Short's bill was not passed, the uproar it caused forced one tabloid to move (temporarily) its Page Three Girl to page seven, but more importantly it launched a wider national debate on the representation of women in the media (Short, 1991).

As these examples show, representation has always been an important battleground for contemporary feminism. The women's movement is not only engaged in a material struggle about equal rights and opportunities for women, but also in a symbolic conflict about definitions of femininity (and by omission masculinity). Such a double-edged politics is currently found in other new social movements as well. Alberto Melucci (1988) has characterized new social movements as **new media** that 'publicize' existing conflicts and produce a symbolic challenge to the dominant codes of society. The communication of that challenge exists within a symbolic excess of old and new, strange and familiar, common and exotic signs, and is reconstructed by other communicators, the mass media being definitely among the most powerful (cf. van Zoonen, 1994).

Since the early 1970s a considerable collection of feminist action and thought about the media has accumulated. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to some salient issues in feminist media theory and research of the past two decades which will lead up to the theoretical framework laid out in Chapter 3. There are several ways of structuring such an overview. A number of authors, myself among them (van Zoonen, 1991a, 1992a), have used typologies of feminist thought. Leslie Steeves (1987) for instance, distinguishes between radical feminism which has a strong interest in pornography, liberal feminism concerned among other things with stereotypes and gender socialization, and Marxist and socialist feminism focusing on the interaction between gender, class and ideology. In Steeves' classification psychoanalysis and cultural studies are discussed in the context of socialist feminism. I use similar distinctions in an article called 'Feminist perspectives on the media' (1991a) seeing cultural studies, however, as a body of thought in itself departing in some fundamental ways from socialist feminism.

The problems with such classifications are manifold. To begin with political and theoretical strands tend to be conjoined in a manner that obscures important differences between and within theories. Liberal feminism, for instance, is much more prominent in the United States than in Britain or continental Europe where the impression is that liberal feminism is a political strategy mainly that has not produced the same elaboration of theory as has arisen from socialist and radical traditions.[1] This is connected with a second point – that liberal, radical and socialist

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feminism have, over the past twenty years, undergone considerable change and encompass a range of theoretical developments and a huge diversity of positions. Distinctions that used to be meaningful, for instance between liberal and radical feminism, have now become blurred (Eisenstein, 1981) and certainly at odds with the current fragmentation of feminist thought. A diversity, moreover, which is not culturally consistent, in the sense that radical feminism in the Netherlands, for instance, is of a different nature from radical feminism in the United States or in Britain.

Presenting feminism in typologies tends to obscure this change and diversity, and also the ways in which feminist perspectives have developed through debate, critique and countercritique. The existence and importance of black feminism – which is itself diverse and not a monolithic entity – has not been easily recognized in any of these typologies. The same goes for other typologies based on theoretical rather than political differences. Kaplan (1987), for instance, distinguishes between essentialist and non-essentialist feminism; Hermes (1993) differentiates modernist from post-modernist thought; others discern between thinking in terms of gender equality versus thinking in terms of gender difference (Hermsen and van Lenning, 1991). Apart from the explanatory and catalyst value of these juxtapositions, such dichotomies are also bound to elide the variety and intermingledness of feminist theory.

Another problem of many of the typologies mentioned, political and theoretical, is that they are construed out of general feminist thinking (for example, Jaggar, 1983; Tong, 1989) and then applied to feminist media studies imposing a more or less extraneous and not always relevant order on the field. An example of that can be seen in my own typology of liberal, radical and socialist feminist media theory (van Zoonen, 1991a). I suggested that research on stereotypes and socialization belongs typically to liberal feminist media research given its epistemological and political-philosophical premisses, therewith overlooking the fact that many feminist communication scholars engaged in that area do not perceive themselves as 'liberal' at all and consider their work misrepresented (for example, Gallagher, 1992).

A typology therefore does not seem to be the most adequate instrument to provide the reader with an introduction to some issues in feminist media critique.[2] I will adopt a different angle, following Brunsdon's observation (1993) that in the past two decades feminist media critique has moved from outside to inside the academic disciplines of communication, media and cultural studies.

> While in 1976 the feminist critic writes a primary address to her movement sisters, in a tone quite hostile to the mass media, yet concerned to justify her attention to television, by the mid-1980s she inhabits a more academic position, tends to address other scholars and is beginning to be anthologized in books used on both Communication and Women's Studies courses. (1993: 309)

Useful questions for this chapter thus may be how and to what extent feminism has acquired a position in these fields, how its themes have been incorporated into the agenda and how it contributed to a paradigm shift.

These particular questions are inspired by Sandra Harding's landmark study on gender and science, *The Science Question in Feminism* (1987).

Feminist critiques on communication studies[3]

Harding identifies several ways in which feminist scholars have criticized traditional science. To begin with feminists have drawn attention to the underrepresentation of women in higher education and as scientists. Formal and informal discrimination have prevented women from gaining access to the academic world. In communication and cultural studies, both in the United States and Europe,[4] the situation is not fundamentally different, with male faculty dominating, despite the high numbers of female students (Schamber, 1989).

Secondly, feminists have pointed to the sexist use of science and shown how disciplines such as biology and the social sciences have contributed to the needs of 'sexist, racist, homophobic and classist social projects' (Harding, 1987: 21). Helen Baehr (1980: 144) claims that the selection of an all-female sample in the by now classic communication study on media and personal influence 'the two-step flow' study of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), reflected 'the fact that American women represented an enormously profitable pool of consumers whom it was vital to "persuade" via advertising'. According to Baehr the study obscured the real interests of women in according them relevance as housewives and consumers only.

A third type of critique on traditional science concerns the themes, theories and methodologies which have been shown to be male-biased in the sense that women's problems have been ignored in many research agendas and that the particular experience of men has often been presented as having universal validity, overlooking the particular experiences of women. Apart from the neglect of specific themes, an issue to which I shall return later, communication studies has at least one exceptional case here in the 'two-step flow' study mentioned before. Although based on an all-female sample, it did acquire classic status as the way media *in general* influence people, thus accrediting universal value to the experiences of women, usually perceived as merely particular.

A fourth challenge feminists have presented to science, according to Harding, concerns the tenets of science itself. Feminists have claimed that objectivity, value-freeness and neutrality are offsprings of the hegemony of masculine modes of thinking that cherish dichotomies such as objectivity vs subjectivity, reason vs emotion, expert vs lay knowledge, abstract vs concrete, etc. It is argued that traditional science not only ignores women's themes and experiences, it also denies the validity of women's ways of knowing. Brenda Dervin (1987), discussing the potential contribution of feminist scholarship to the field of communication, argues that feminist scholars bring a 'female' viewpoint to the field, which is 'a new perspective, a new microscope for observation, that is not possible of somebody who is in the system. Women live outside the master's house[5] and therefore cannot use the master's tools for their own articulations' (1987: 113).

Finally, the feminist challenge to traditional science has produced a postmodernist understanding of science as socially constructed, as situated knowledge, grounded in the social experiences of its practitioners which are traversed by the contradictory claims of being a scientist, black, woman, feminist, socialist etc. A notable example in communication studies is Janice Winship's analysis (1987) of women's magazines in which she does not claim to speak for all women or from 'a female experience', but in which she uses her own individually, socially and culturally specific preferences as a starting point to understand the differential meanings of these magazines.

The multifaceted critique of feminist researchers does not seem to have resulted in an acknowledgement of the importance of gender issues in communication studies as a whole.[6] To mention some arbitrary examples: in Denis McQuail's bestselling *Introduction to Mass Communication Theory*, first published in 1983, there is no reference to 'woman', 'gender', 'sexuality' or other feminist concerns. In the revised second edition in 1987 one paragraph on feminist content analysis has been added. In special issues on communication research in western and eastern Europe published by the *European Journal of Communication* (1990) and *Media, Culture & Society* (1990) references to gender or feminism are all but absent. Moreover, there are still various areas in mass communication research that seem relatively untouched by feminist research, such as the study of new information technologies (van Zoonen, 1992a) and (tele)communication policy (Moyal, 1992) or research focusing on media and citizenship, such as political communication and news research (van Zoonen, 1991b, 1994). Although sometimes labelled a little derisorily as the 'add women and stir' approach (cf. Franklin et al., 1991: 2), in such areas it is still necessary to raise the simple question: how about women? In these areas Reinharz's description of the past still holds: 'At first, the very act of discovering sexism in scholarship was revolutionary. . . . it was radical simply to study women' (1992: 11).

In spite of the marginal position of feminist media studies in the discipline as a whole, there are at least two themes taken up and/or revitalized by feminist communication scholars which have gained a more habitual importance: stereotypes and gender socialization, and ideology, the latter of course erstwhile prominent in critical studies. Pornography, a third prominent issue in feminist media theory and research, has not gained similar interest and status within the academic sphere. The observant reader will notice that these are the three themes which some authors say 'belong' to particular currents of feminism, respectively liberal, radical and socialist feminism. However, as said earlier, debate on stereotypes, pornography and ideology has been engaged in by researchers from diverse feminist backgrounds, undermining theoretical or political 'monopolies' on any of these issues.

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Feminist themes in communication studies

Stereotypes and socialization

Initially, the new themes that feminist media scholars added to the agenda of communication research were the stereotypical images of women in the media and the effects of these images on the audience. Rakow (1986) identifies two reasons for these particular themes: they were key elements of early feminist texts, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and they fitted well into the empirical research paradigm of communication studies. The latter is supported by an argument of Stacey and Thorne (1985) that a prerequisite for a successful intervention in any discipline is the existence of a tradition or subject matter related to feminist concerns.

The early review articles of images and effect research did not yet address the biases of communication research itself and seemed rather optimistic about the flexibility of the discipline. Busby (1975), for instance, claims that the latest feminist movement may have raised some consciousness within the academic community. Tuchman, however, is much more critical of the communication research community and argues that its scholars have not been very interested in the subject 'woman': 'And why should they? Before the advent of the women's movement these stereotypes seemed natural, "given". Few questioned how they developed, how they were reinforced, or how they were maintained. Certainly the media's role in this process was not questioned' (1978a: 5).

Tuchman was among the first to produce research within a well-developed theoretical framework. In her introductory statement to a collection of articles about women and the media, she says:

> Our society, like any other society, must pass on its social heritage from one generation to the next. The societal need for continuity and transmission of dominant values may be particularly acute in times of rapid social change, such as our own. Then, individuals need some familiarity with the past, if the society is to survive, but they must also be prepared to meet changing conditions. Nowhere is that need as readily identifiable as in the area of sex roles. (1978a: 3)

Drawing from different research data, Tuchman shows that at present the media fail to live up to this function. While an impressive social transformation has taken place with over half of all American women in the labour force, television shows hardly anything of the kind. Television symbolically annihilates women, according to Tuchman, and tells society women are not very important by showing an overwhelming majority of men in almost all kinds of television output. Only in soap operas do women dominate the screen. Not only does television tell us that women don't matter very much except as housewives and mothers, but also it symbolically denigrates them by portraying them as incompetent, inferior and always subservient to men. The symbolic annihilation of women will endanger social development, according to Tuchman, for girls and mature women lack positive images on which to model their behaviour:

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> Girls exposed to 'television women' may hope to be homemakers when they are adults, but not workers outside the home. Indeed, as adults these girls may resist work outside the home unless necessary for the economic well being of their families. Encouraging such an attitude in our nation's girls can present a problem in the future . . . the active participation of women in the labor force is vital to the maintenance of the American economy. (Tuchman, 1978a: 7)

Tuchman's analysis contains the basic elements of a functionalist feminist media theory: media reflect society's dominant social values and symbolically denigrate women, either by not showing them at all, or by depicting them in stereotypical roles. The models that media offer are restrictive and endanger the development of girls and women into complete human beings and socially valuable workers. Why the media function in such a counterproductive way is not explicitly answered by Tuchman, but other authors working in this paradigm have pointed to the dominance of male broadcasters and journalists whose gender socialization causes them to reproduce society's dominant values (Butler and Paisley, 1980).

An abundance of this type of research has been carried out all over the world, using primarily quantitative content analysis and social experimental methods. Gallagher (1980, 1985) summarized these projects and found depressing similarities between western industrialized, eastern communist and southern developing countries: women are underrepresented in the media, in production as well as in content. Moreover, the women that do appear in media content tend to be young and conventionally pretty, defined in relation to their husband, father, son, boss or another man, and portrayed as passive, indecisive, submissive, dependent etc. Social experimental studies trying to establish the impact of these sex role stereotypes on children in particular have shown contradictory results. Some studies support the socialization hypothesis, while others find too many intervening factors to justify a conclusion about media effects.

Recently, black researchers have raised the question of how black women are portrayed in western mass media. A study by Preethi Manuel (1985) of blacks in British television drama (referring to people from African, Indian, Pakistani and West Indian origin) showed that of the total number of actors involved in more than 600 drama programmes, only 2.25 per cent were black. Mostly they were cast as low-paid workers, students and law breakers, or as background figures. Black women hardly appeared at all. Most worrying to Manuel is the complete absence of black families from British TV drama. She concludes:

> In relegating blacks to the 'fringe' and giving them little to say, in portraying them as belonging to a subversive minority, it can only be said that negative attitudes of society towards blacks will be perpetuated. Black children are growing up without positive role models and consequently with a lowered self-image – the effect on white children is potentially as damaging. Inevitably, the pressing need for fair representation is inseparable from the pressing need for a harmonious existence in today's 'multi-cultural society'. (Manuel, 1985: 41–3)

From Melbourne Cummings' (1988) discussion of the changing image of the black family on American television, it appears that television draws from widespread stereotypes about black women. One stereotype of the black woman that is particular to American history is the loud but lovable 'mammy to massa's three little children' (1988: 81). More widespread stereotypes mentioned by Cummings concern the image of the black matriarch, the overpowering black woman and the sexually insatiable black woman. The latter stereotype pervades the European colonial heritage as well. Rana Kabbani's (1986) work on European myths of the Orient shows how racist and sexist illusions of uninhibited black female sexuality abound in the work of British and French writers and painters.[7]

Theory and research on stereotypes has proved particularly valuable for its exhaustive documentation of stereotypes and prejudice which women in many countries have been able to use to raise the awareness of communicators and put pressure on their media to improve the images of women. However, on a theoretical as well as an empirical level this approach is not very satisfactory. I shall briefly mention some points that will be taken up in further detail in Chapter 3. Many analyses tend to generalize about the stereotypical nature of media content being insensitive to the specificities of genres, media and audience experiences. Further, the assumption that media content can be adequately characterized by a reference to the stereotypical *roles* of its population is rather incomplete. The mutual relationships of characters, their contribution to and involvement in the narrative, their visualization and their status in a particular genre, are all equally important. Finally, this type of research assumes an unequivocal meaning and effect of media content, with stereotypical images leading more or less unproblematically to stereotypical effects and traditional socialization patterns. The audience is thus implicitly conceptualized as a rather passive mass, merely consuming media messages.

Pornography

Within academic feminist media research and within communication studies, the study of pornography has not gained the same weight as the analysis of stereotypes or ideology. In an early assessment on the type of research on pornography done in mainstream communication studies, Thelma McCormack (1978) has noted that the majority of studies are seriously biased toward a male perspective, in the sense that they focus on how pornography functions for the male consumer ignoring its degrading portrayal of women. McCormack therefore advances a perspective on pornography from the viewpoint of conflict and inequality: 'Pornography would be seen as an extreme form, almost a travesty, of sexual inequality in which women serve as sex objects to arouse and satisfy men and nothing more' (1978: 578). In McCormack's proposal the feminist debates on pornography resound. Many feminists argue that pornography objectifies women for men's pleasures, that it contributes to the eroticization of power and violence and hence the construction of forms of masculine sexuality which seek pleasure through power and violence. Particularly in the United States considerable theoretical and political work has been done in the area of the representation of women's bodies in pornographic magazines, videos and movies. Radical feminists in particular have initiated most feminist activities against pornography,[8] such as the 'Take back the Night' demonstrations, tours through pornodistricts and assaults on pornoshops (Lederer, 1980). Pornography is considered the ultimate cultural expression of men's hatred against women; it is seen as a form of sexual violence against women, simultaneously a source and a product of a deeply misogynistic society. As one of the key authors in this debate, Andrea Dworkin (1980: 289) says: 'Pornography exists because men despise women, and men despise women because pornography exists.' Pornography cannot be considered as the mere representation of sexual fantasies, or as a potentially liberating depiction of nudity and sexuality, it is rather the glorification of male power over women.

Not all forms of sexual representation are being opposed. Rosemarie Tong (1989: 113) summarizes the distinction made by many feminists between *erotica* (from the Greek word 'eros', love or a creative principle) and *thanatica* (from the Greek word 'thanatos', death or destructive principle). 'Whereas erotic representations show sexual representations between fully consenting, equal partners who identify emotionally with each other, thanatic representations show sexual representations in which full consent, real equality and emotional identification are absent.' According to Tong, thanatic or pornographic representations encourage men to treat women as mere objects, thereby reproducing male dominance. Apart from particular attributes and violent 'narratives' in pornography, various visual codes construct its sexist and misogynistic character: by looking directly and invitingly at the camera lens the pornographic model signifies willingness and readiness to subsume to the male consumer, building on, and reinforcing, the patriarchal ideology of women as available objects; the pornographic convention of fragmenting the female body into close-ups of her sexual organs reduces women to functional, depersonalized body parts for male satisfaction; and finally particular camera angles and body postures construct an image of women as powerless and submissive, as objects of male desire for sexual power and domination (Coward, 1982).

Pornography arouses so much anger among many feminists because they assume it has a serious influence on male behaviour towards women. It is thought to encourage and legitimize violence against women as expressed in the feminist motto: Pornography is the Theory and Rape the Practice. This so-called 'harm principle' used to be a core issue in feminist efforts to ban pornography, however it turned out to be difficult to find compelling empirical evidence to convince legislators of the harmful effects of pornography. Two US presidential committees have studied the effects of pornography extensively and produced contradictory results. In 1970 the Lockhart Commission on Obscenity and Pornography found no evidence that the use of pornography played a role in criminal behaviour among

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youths or adults. More than a decade later, the Meese Commission concluded that violent pornography did have an effect on male aggressive behaviour. Both commissions were subject to heavy criticism, among other reasons for relying on highly controversial research projects. With such ambiguity over the relationship between pornography and sexual violence, it seemed hard to justify feminist claims to ban pornography. Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist activist, and Catherine MacKinnon, a radical feminist lawyer, therefore advanced another approach to introduce legislation against pornography. Instead of defining pornography as a criminal act endorsing violence against women, they proposed to see pornography as a civil rights violation against which women, and others who feel offended, should be able to take legal action. In their proposed anti-pornography ordinance they define pornography as:

> Pornography is the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following: women are presented as dehumanized sexual objects, things or commodities; or women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or women are presented in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; or women's body parts – including but not limited to vaginas, breasts and buttocks – are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts; or women are presented as whores by nature; or women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. (in Burstyn, 1985)

It is argued that pornography harms women's opportunities for equal rights, that it creates harassment and private degradation, that it promotes sexual violence and inhibits a just enforcement of the law, and that it significantly restricts women from the full exercise of their citizenship and participation in public life. Therefore, the MacKinnon/Dworkin proposal would enable women to sue the producers, distributors and exhibitors of pornography on the basis of discrimination charges.

The MacKinnon/Dworkin proposal, however, drew mixed support. In the city of Minneapolis many feminists and the liberal city council encouraged the proposal. A similar law was passed in the city of Indianapolis, but here the support came from right wing fundamentalists only. Ultimately, the US Supreme Court declared the ordinances unconstitutional, in contradiction with the First Amendment, which guarantees press freedom in the United States.

MacKinnon and Dworkin's work has incited dramatic and divisive conflicts within the American women's movement. The proposal generated a curious political coalition of feminists and fundamentalist Christians which made many women activists uncomfortable; gay activists saw the representation of gay sexuality in various cultural forms threatened; other feminists argued against the implicit definition in the proposal of female sexuality as friendly, respectful and non-violent and claimed the right of women to enjoy, for instance, S/M practices; liberal feminists defending First Amendment rights were among the most outspoken opponents of the MacKinnon/Dworkin proposal and contributed much to its later defeat (Burstyn, 1985).

The particulars of the feminist debates on pornography and sexuality cannot be rehearsed here (see for example, Vance, 1984), however, one element is of particular relevance to media theory and research. Defining pornography as an act of violence raises a question on the nature of representation and its relation to social reality. Opponents would argue that radical feminists inaccurately collapse representation into social reality and claim that pornography is a representation of something, an image in words and pictures, but that it is not the act itself (cf. Leong, 1991). Such an argument, however, ignores the point that representation is a social practice in which current beliefs and myths about women and sexuality are (re)constructed, and that the act of consuming these representations is more than a private pleasure, but also embedded in gendered social and cultural formations that have defined women's bodies as sexual objects. The latter observation, in its turn, then raises the question why pornography should be treated as a separate phenomenon, given a wider cultural tradition of representing women as objects of the male gaze, present, for instance, in advertising and mainstream Hollywood movies. Such issues of representation, reality and social practices are central to feminist media studies and extend beyond the pornography debate. They will be taken up in detail in Chapter 3.

Ideology

Theories of ideology are part of the 'critical' domain in communication studies and cultural studies. Critical communication scholars used to ignore gender just like mainstream communication scholars did, as the account of the Women's Studies Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham confirms: 'We found it extremely difficult to participate in the CCCS groups and felt, without being able to articulate it, that it was a case of the masculine domination of both intellectual work and the environment in which it was being carried out' (*Women Take Issue*, 1978: 11). Feminist interventions in ideology theory have come from radical and Marxist, but in particular from socialist feminism. Because the cultural studies perspectives that will be discussed in the following chapter are in large part grounded in socialist feminist theory, ideology will be discussed more extensively than the previous themes of stereotypes and pornography.

Socialist feminists have shown a profound theoretical and political interest in connecting the capitalist mode of production to the oppression of women. Neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis and ideology theory provide the sources for this theoretical project.

From **Marxism** it takes not only the political economic analysis of capitalism, but also a conception of human nature as constituted in society: 'Specific historical conditions create distinctive human types' (Jaggar, 1983: 125). But whereas Marxists only recognize the capitalist and the worker as human types, socialist feminism acknowledges that human beings are defined by gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality and nationality as well. Its theoretical challenge has been to relate these differences, and gender difference in particular, to historical, social and economic conditions.

Among the different **psychoanalytic theories** adopted by socialist feminists the reinterpretation of Freud by the Frenchman Jacques Lacan and the work of the American Nancy Chodorow are of particular importance. Freud located the development of gendered subjectivity in the 'phallic stage' of infancy when children discover their genitals. This phase is characterized by the Oedipus and castration complexes that need to be negotiated in order to develop into 'normal' adults. Freud argued that at the same time a little boy becomes aware of his love for his mother, he recognizes her lack of a penis and becomes afraid that he might lose his penis too. He perceives his father as the powerful figure possessing his mother and capable of castrating the boy for his desire for the mother. To develop a 'normal' masculine subjectivity then, it is necessary that the boy denies his love for his mother, identifies with his father and internalizes his values. In the process he develops a 'superego'; the condensation of the patriarchal social conscience. Were the boy not to emerge from the Oedipal position and were he to remain immersed in maternal plenitude, his 'normal' masculinity would be endangered and indeed he would end up symbolically castrated. Thus, for a boy to become a man he has to separate from his mother and identify with his father. The little girl on the other hand passes these phases differently. As she becomes aware of her own lack of a penis, she develops penis envy and resents the mother for badly equipping her. To take revenge she turns to the father, competing for his love with her mother and desiring his penis. Only if the girl succeeds in substituting her phallic desire by the wish to have a baby – the ultimate penis substitute for women according to Freud – will she develop as an untroubled mature woman.

In Lacan's rewriting of Freud it is not so much the physical penis that is central, but the social and cultural power it represents, the phallus. Lacan argues that the child's separation from the mother takes place through the acquisition of language, or to put it differently, by the child's entry into the symbolic order. Without such a symbolic order which connects human beings to each other and makes sense of human experience, people cannot function and end up as psychotic. The Lacanian symbolic order is inevitably patriarchal, due to the structural position of the father as the intervening third party between mother and child: 'In the imagination, the father's position is the same as that occupied by language, in that language intervenes in the imaginary dyad [between mother and child] as the

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symbolic words that rupture the threads of phantasy that hold lack at bay and the illusion of union in place' (Brennan, 1989: 3). The patriarchal nature of the symbolic is thus a product of the equivalent structural position of language and the father as interveners in the mother–child bond. Submission to the patriarchal symbolic order – the Law of the father in Lacan's words – is a prerequisite for human autonomy and sanity. However, for boys the process implies access to social power, whereas for girls it involves entry into a patriarchal order in which 'the feminine' has no place and cannot be spoken.

According to the materialist psychoanalysis of Nancy Chodorow, the acquisition of gender identity takes place before the Oedipal phase. In this early period in life the child is completely dependent on the parent, usually the mother and there is a strong mother–child symbiosis in which the child continually wonders whether he or she and the mother are one. This symbiosis is much stronger for mother and daughter since they are of the same sex: daughters develop a personal identification and a more continuous relationship with the mother. Boys have less opportunity for such direct identification because of the relative absence of the father. The boy develops a sense of being not feminine, and identifies with the position of the father rather than with his person. As a result, girls come to think of themselves in relation to others (the mother) while boys perceive themselves as unconnected individuals (the absent father). Penis envy in Chodorow's theory is not the female desire for the physical thing, but represents the desire to separate from the mother and become an autonomous person.

There is a crude resemblance to the developmental ideas of Freud and Lacan, but the major difference is that Chodorow's psychoanalysis is materialistic in that it explains gender difference from the social process of mothering. In Chodorow's theory femininity is not characterized by 'lack' or 'otherness' but by the capacity for meaningful triadic relationships.

Psychoanalysis has been instrumental to socialist feminist thought through locating the reproduction of gender and patriarchal relations at the level of **ideology**, as theorized in particular by neo-Marxists like Althusser and Gramsci. Within Marxist/socialist theory, ideology is the key concept to explain why it is that the conditions necessary for the capitalist mode of production are maintained and, for instance, workers do not revolt against their oppression. More formally ideology has been defined as:

> The means by which ruling economic classes generalize and extend their supremacy across the whole range of social activity, and naturalize it in the process, so that their rule is accepted and natural and inevitable, and therefore legitimate and binding. (O'Sullivan et al., 1989: 109)

While Althusser's and Gramsci's theories ignore the gender issue, the ideological mechanisms they analyse have been a source of inspiration for socialist feminists, who claim that gender is a crucial component of ideology.

Althusser drew from the Lacanian notion of subjectivity as constituted in

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language for the development of his theory of ideology. According to Althusser people become subjects because of interpellation by ideology. This is to say that we are only able to make sense of ourselves and our social experiences within the limits and possibilities that language and the meaning systems available in a given society set for us. Language is not seen as a transparent medium conveying one's authentic experiences, or what really happened, but as constructing subjectivity and reality. According to the Lacanian dictum: 'we don't speak language, language speaks us'.

Althusser introduced the term **ideological state apparatuses** (ISAs) to refer to institutions such as religion, education, politics, the law, the family, media and culture. Although relatively autonomous from the state and capital and despite their variety and internal contradictions these institutions are said to function as agents of the state and the ruling class. Since ISAs cannot be directly controlled by the ruling class, they are ideological battlegrounds that betray the contradictions within dominant ideology. In the end, however, ISAs will function in favour of dominant ideology, although Althusser fails to explain exactly why and how this is achieved.

In Althusserian theories of ideology the individual is interpellated by dominant ideology; in other words, individuals are inexorably drawn into dominant ideology. Gramsci's notes on 'hegemony' provide an important addition to such a concept of ideology. Gramsci used 'hegemony' to refer to the *process* by which general consent is actively sought for the interpretations of the ruling class. Dominant ideology becomes invisible because it is translated into 'common sense', appearing as the natural, unpolitical state of things accepted by each and everyone. Like Althusser, Gramsci identifies ideological institutions and intermediaries like the priest and the intellectual, who translate the concepts of the ruling class into the ordinary language and experiences of the worker.

Clearly, the media are the contemporary mediators of hegemony, the question being how, and to whose avail, particular ideological constructs of femininity are produced in media content. Much of the research done in this vein consists of ideological analyses of singular media texts using the instrumentarium offered by psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics (for example, Coward, 1984). The idiosyncratic nature of these analyses makes any comprehensive and meaningful review impracticable and therefore I shall discuss only one research project, which, although dating from the early 1980s, exemplifies the approach and issues concerned.

A typical ideological analysis of popular culture for women is Angela McRobbie's (1982) examination of the British teenage magazine *Jackie*, aimed at girls in the ten to fourteen age group. McRobbie sets out with a brief description of the publishing house responsible for *Jackie*, D.C. Thompson of Dundee, whose history is characterized by 'a vigorous anti-unionism' and a 'strict code of censorship and content', according to McRobbie. Its annual profit margins rise as high as 20 per cent even in a time of crisis in the publishing industries. Having thus identified D.C.

Thompson as a classic capitalist entrepreneur, McRobbie argues that these companies are not simply pursuing profits, but they are involved in 'an implicit attempt to win consent to the dominant order – in terms of femininity, leisure and consumption, i.e. at the level of culture' (p. 87). Publishing companies are part of the relatively autonomous apparatuses of the social formation that have their own particular operational modes and that cannot be seen as a unified whole. McRobbie acknowledges the internal contradictions of hegemony and argues that the working class, and especially the working class youth, has found ways to subvert hegemony by reappropriating cultural products and incorporating them into oppositional and subcultural styles of their own. However,the possibilities for that reappropriation are much more difficult for girls, says McRobbie, since the cultural forms available to girls are limited and their use – such as reading teenage magazines – is primarily confined to the personal sphere. Thus, while for working class male youth a cultural negotiation of the dominant social order is thought feasible, McRobbie finds resistance much harder to envisage in teenage girls' subcultural practices. In their leisure time, free of any direct coercion from work, school or the family, girls enjoy the illusion of freedom. But capital effectively controls leisure time as well, with magazines like *Jackie* as intermediaries. How does McRobbie think this control is achieved in *Jackie*?

McRobbie uses semiology, the analysis of visual and verbal signs, to examine the 'connotative codes' present in *Jackie*. 'Connotation' here refers to implied or associative meanings of signs whereas 'denotation' refers to their literal meaning (see also Chapter 5). For instance, in *Jackie*'s picture stories brunette girls do not only have brown hair and probably brown eyes , but the brunette is also usually involved in some vicious plot to get the man she wants, her best friend's boyfriend for instance. Brunettes thus mean trouble (connotation). McRobbie distinguishes four codes of connotation in *Jackie*: the code of romance; the code of personal/domestic life; the code of fashion and beauty; the code of pop music. Heterosexual romance is the core theme of *Jackie* and it comes to the reader in picture stories, on the problem page and in 'true life' stories. The picture stories usually feature two or three main characters, who are a little older than the average reader, their social backgrounds are unclear and their surroundings or use of language do not give them away either. The main characters come in easily recognizable stereotypes, according to McRobbie. Boys are irresistible charmers, tousled scatterbrains, sensitive artists or wild but sexy delinquents. Girls are blonde, quiet and timid, unreliable brunettes or plain ordinary. They are a fun loving group whose main occupation is to pursue each other. For girls the main task in life is to get and keep a man and in this respect other women cannot be trusted. 'The girl's life is defined through emotions – jealousy, possessiveness and devotion. Pervading the stories is a fundamental fear, fear of losing your boyfriend or of never getting one' (p. 107). And it is not simply the boy that the girls are after, what they want is romance, a publicly recognized relationship. Girls in *Jackie* see boys as romantic objects not as sexual objects, McRobbie claims. The code of romance in *Jackie* thus constructs hetereosexual romance as the all-pervasive concern of girls' adolescence and solidifies at the same time separate and distinct male and female roles.

In real life these themes are fraught with problems of course and these are indeed discussed on the problem page. Here, the ideological operations of *Jackie* show more openly, encouraging conventional individualism and conformist independence. 'That is: the girl is channelled both toward traditional female (passive) behaviour and to having a mind of her own. She is warned of the dangers of following others blindly and is discouraged from wasting time at work, playing truant from school or gossiping' (p. 115).

Fashion, cosmetics and beauty are signs of another central code in adolescent femininity. Clothing and cosmetics themselves are signs that girls are taught to operate to create a particular and recognizable image for themselves. While fashion and beauty are not central to the magazine, their message is that they are absolutely necessary components of a girl's life. It is taken for granted that the adolescent female body is in need of continuous maintenance and improvement, and *Jackie* provides step-by-step manuals to achieve self-improvement.

Finally, pop music is a central element of *Jackie*; however, it is not the music itself that matters but the star, with each week a single and double page devoted to a pop musician. In fact, the pictures of pop stars enable *Jackie* readers once again to fantasize about romance: 'Instead of being encouraged to develop an interest in this area, or to create their own music, the readers are presented, yet again, with another opportunity to indulge their emotions, but this time on the pop star figure rather than the boyfriend' (p. 126).

All in all, *Jackie* articulates the centrality of personal life for girls. It presents an all-embracing, suffocating totality of romance and emotion, stopping girls from doing or thinking about anything else. Although McRobbie cautions in her conclusion against the idea that readers will swallow the ideological axioms without question, she does consider the discourse of *Jackie* as immensely powerful, 'especially if we consider it being absorbed, in its codified form, each week for several years at a time' (p. 131).

McRobbie's analysis is a good example of an ideological analysis of popular culture. She focuses on the ideological operations of media texts produced within a capitalist context leaving the impression of an all pervasive hegemonic process from which there is no escape. McRobbie later conceded that her textual analysis 'created an image of *Jackie* as a massive ideological block in which readers were implicitly imprisoned' (1991: 141). While McRobbie's project allows for contradictions in the hegemonic process, in the actual analysis of *Jackie*, theoretical sophistication gives way to a rather straightforward interpretation of *Jackie* as a monolithic ideological construction of adolescent femininity. Later

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research among the readers of *Jackie* showed a multiplicity of interpretations and reactions not necessarily in line with hegemony (Frazer, 1987).

Feminist contributions to a new paradigm?

Aside from adding new themes to the research agenda or transforming old ones, a more fundamental issue concerns the question whether feminist media theory and research has offered new ways of approaching these themes. Did feminist communication scholars develop new frameworks, new designs and new methods, and did these innovations affect the guiding paradigms in the discipline at large? In order to answer that question, it is necessary to take a closer look at the theories of communication behind the three themes discussed – stereotypes and socialization, pornography and ideology. Contrary to the first impression, the work done on these topics shares similar assumptions on the role of the media in the construction of gender. They are perceived as the main instruments in conveying stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity. In research on all three themes media are conceptualized as agents of social control: in research on stereotypes it is said that media pass on society's heritage – which is deeply sexist – in order to secure continuity, integration and the incorporation of change (Tuchman, 1978a); anti-pornography campaigners argue that media serve the needs of patriarchy by representing women as objects and by suppressing women's own experiences (Dworkin, 1981); and in theories of ideology media are viewed as hegemonic institutions that present the capitalist and patriarchal order as 'normal', obscuring its ideological nature and translating it into 'common sense' (*Women Take Issue*, 1978). In all three areas a structural functionalist media theory is employed, following the Lasswellian question: who, says what, to whom, and with what effect? Carey (1989: 15) has labelled this conceptualization as a transmission view of communication: 'The center of this idea is the transmission of signals and messages over distance for the purpose of control.' In feminist terminology media are thought to transmit sexist, patriarchal or capitalist values to contribute to the maintenance of social order. In such models meaning is located primarily in relatively consistent and uncontradictory media texts. The transmission view of communication has become subject to strong criticism, from feminist and other communication scholars, to the extent that several authors now argue that the academic study of mass communication is in the middle of a paradigm shift involving a movement toward perspectives in which meaning is understood as constructed out of the historically and socially situated negotiation between institutional producers of meaning and audiences as producers of meaning.[9] As alluded to in Chapter 1, meaning is no longer conceptualized as a more or less consistent entity, but is seen as contradictory, divided and plural, in other words as polysemic (Morley, 1989). The ample acknowledgement of the importance of Ien

Ang's (1985) and Janice Radway's (1984) work on the interpretative activities of audiences of soaps and romances respectively, shows that feminist media research has certainly played a part in this reconceptualization of meaning and communication. However, it would be hard to isolate the feminist impact and distinguish it from other influences, in particular those of cultural studies. As said in the Introduction of this book, it is precisely at the junction of feminist and cultural studies that the most innovative and inspiring research is carried out. In the next chapter, I shall expand this discussion, laying out the flaws of feminist transmission models of communication in more detail and build from that a cultural studies framework for feminist media theory.

Notes

1. This point was brought to my attention by Stevi Jackson.
2. Originally, this chapter was divided into three sections on liberal, radical and socialist feminism, the latter including psychoanalysis. Instructive and constructive criticism, in particular from Margaret Gallagher, Stevi Jackson, Irene Meijer and my students who did not feel very updated with this tripartition made me decide to use another angle.
3. I use the term 'communication studies' to refer to mass communication, journalism, media studies etc.
4. The observation on the United States is based on Schamber, 1989. The observation on Europe is based on personal communication with faculty of the more than twenty universities from ten countries involved in the Erasmus student and staff exchange network 'European Cultural and Media Studies'.
5. Dervin (1987) includes the following note at this point: 'The term is from Lourde's *Sister Outsider*: 'For the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house.'
6. With the exception of some special issues of journals, such as *Communication* (1986), *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (1987). The tendency seems to be, however, to treat feminism as a separate area rather than incorporating its concepts into mainstream research.
7. The representation of gender and ethnicity will be discussed further in Chapter 5.
8. At least – as it seems – in the United States. In Britain and continental Europe the demonstrations against pornography were engaged in by socialist feminists as well, another example of blurred distinctions.
9. Other authors argue against the idea of a paradigm shift (Curran, 1990).

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